

## 05hh- Purpose Of The Precepts

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(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

**Q:** What is the purpose of the precepts?

**Nm:** The purpose is for developing strength of mind and the first step for achieving that is to be able to say “no” to yourself. To say “no” to your desires, whims, habits and addictions. The main rules on which the practice is based are very practical and necessary. They are not supposed to be held because of a belief or because an authority tells you to, they are kept because they hold, in themselves, the practice of meditation - the development of mind. Think of the precepts as a fertile ground where you can plant seeds in order to grow fruit trees. They are not the tree or the seed, but having a grown tree would be impossible without that fertile ground existing. In that sense, you can see the necessity of the fertile ground being present, you can see the necessity of the precepts. Without them, there is no point in you watering seeds, when you have destroyed the fertility of the ground, when you have compromised the fundamental precepts.

**Q:** What are you trying to grow?

**Nm:** You are trying to grow your freedom of mind because it is bound by craving, it is liable to feelings. Which means when pain arises you won't be able to not resist it, when pleasure arises you won't be able but to indulge it. In other words, you are controlled by what you feel and you are controlled because the mind is too weak in regard to what it feels. So if you want to become stronger than all of those things, then the first step to develop that strength is restraint, the ability to say “no”, not to everything forever, but to certain things which are unwholesome.

**Q:** Could you explain the precept in regard to eating?

**Nm:** You eat because it is necessary for the body to live, and not for sensual reasons or escape from boredom, i.e. eating whatever and whenever. You should recognise the necessity of eating and that's what you keep in mind, if you eat enough calories once a day, that is sufficient, there is no good reason to eat more. Eating more than you need is a form of sensuality, it comes from craving.

**Q:** But in the evening you could suffer from hunger.

**Nm:** It's not a life threatening hunger. In the evening, if you have eaten enough calories in the morning, you have the desire to eat and instead of habitually just giving in to desire and trying to satisfy it by any means, you instead force yourself to restrain and reflect on it: “Ok, why am I pulled by this desire, why is this hunger controlling my mind? Am I really hungry or am I just bored? Does the sensation of an empty stomach mean that I have to eat?”. Through correct contemplation and restraint you will get to understand where the problem is.

**Q:** If I eat a meal at night, then I will be free from that desire.

**Nm:** No you won't. You will be free from hunger, but hunger was not your desire. Yes, there would have been no desire without hunger but hunger is not the desire. Desire is always mental. So when physical hunger affects and controls your mind, then it becomes a desire, which means you might go and remove the physical state but the liability of your mind to be controlled by the physical state remains. Which means that when the next physical thing comes, you will equally be bound by the same desire, hence you can't satisfy your desire and everybody knows that. You can be choosing and engaging in all sorts of sensuality, but you cannot satisfy that desire because it's not there where you are trying to satisfy it. You are appeasing/satisfying physical circumstances, but those are not what the desire is. Yes, desire is inseparable from those things but it's not those things.

The precepts are basically putting up a boundary fence, making the soil fertile so that you can practice. All the precepts are quite practical. In the beginning the monks were allowed to eat in the evening, they could eat throughout the day but then it became impractical for various reasons, going out at night, facing all sorts of dangers, etc. So then a rule was formulated to eat only at the right time, i.e. you don't go out at night to collect food but only in the morning. It became more practical, and you don't spend the rest of your day planning and being concerned about food, but rather you spend it practising restraint, composure and wisdom.

The eight precepts is what defines a fertile field that is not negotiable. For example, how can you possibly be developing clarity and strength of mind, when you are drinking alcohol that's clearly directly affecting your clarity of mind. You need to eat some food but you don't need to drink alcohol, hence it's always going to be done for sensual reasons. Even when people say that they only drink socially or that people around them pressure them to do so, that's also a sensual reason, because you are basically afraid of adversely affecting your sensual environment. You don't want to upset anyone or be shunned by your social group. That's quite ridiculous especially if you are trying to develop the strength of mind. How can that be developed if you give in to minor weaknesses or are moved because people laugh and tease you for not drinking. So what? How can you go beyond suffering, when just by someone teasing you, you cannot maintain your virtuous behaviour.

**Q:** The precepts are not the only work that one must do.

**Nm:** The eight precepts are the necessary fertile field which is the basis for starting the work. You can have all the fertile ground that you want but if you don't have the correct seeds and if you don't put the work in maintaining the soil, they are not going to grow. The soil will not do the work for you, it's just the soil..

#### [Mn66 -The Quail Simile:](#)

*"...Then in the late afternoon, Udāyī came out of solitude and went to the Buddha. He bowed, sat down to one side, and said to him:*

*"Just now, sir, as I was alone this thought came to mind: 'The Buddha has rid us of so many things that bring suffering and gifted us so many things that bring happiness! He has rid us of so many unskillful things and gifted us so many skillful things!'*

*For we used to eat in the evening, the morning, and at the wrong time of day. But then there came a time when the Buddha addressed the mendicants, saying, 'Please, mendicants, give up that meal at the wrong time of day.' At that, sir, we became sad and upset, 'But these faithful householders give us a variety of delicious foods at the wrong time of day. And the Blessed One tells us to give it up! The Holy One tells us to let it go!' But out of affection and respect for the Buddha, and out of conscience and concern, we gave up that meal at the wrong time of day. Then we ate in the evening and the morning.*

*But then there came a time when the Buddha addressed the mendicants, saying, 'Please, mendicants, give up that meal at the wrong time of night.' At that, sir, we became sad and upset, 'But that's considered the more delicious of the two meals. And the Blessed One tells us to give it up! The Holy One tells us to let it go!' Once it so happened that a certain person got some soup during the day. He said, 'Come, let's set this aside; we'll enjoy it together this evening.' Nearly all meals are prepared at night, only a few in the day. But out of affection and respect for the Buddha, and out of conscience and concern, we gave up that meal at the wrong time of night.*

*In the past, mendicants went wandering for alms in the dark of the night. They walked into a swamp, or fell into a sewer, or collided with a thorn bush, or collided with a sleeping cow, or encountered youths escaping a crime or on their way to commit one, or were invited by a female to commit a lewd act...*

*...Recollecting that, I thought, 'The Buddha has rid us of so many things that bring suffering and gifted us so many things that bring happiness! He has rid us of so many unskillful things and gifted us so many skillful things!'*"

*The Buddha: "'In the same way, Udayin, there are some worthless men who, when I tell them, 'Abandon this,' say: 'Why this petty, elementary thing? He's too strict, this contemplative.' They don't abandon it. They're rude to me and to the monks keen on training. For them that's a strong snare, a thick snare, a heavy snare, an unrotting snare, and a thick yoke.*

*Suppose a quail were snared by a rotting creeper, by which it could expect injury, capture, or death, and someone were to say, 'This rotting creeper by which this quail is snared, and by which she could expect injury, capture, or death, is for her a weak snare, a feeble snare, a rotting snare, an insubstantial snare.' Would the person speaking that way be speaking rightly?"*

*Udayin: "No, lord. That rotting creeper... is for her a strong snare, a thick snare, a heavy snare, an unrotting snare, and a thick yoke.*

*The Buddha: "In the same way, Udayin, there are some worthless men who, when I tell them, 'Abandon this,' say: 'Why this petty, elementary thing? He's too strict, this contemplative.' They don't abandon it. They're rude to me and to the monks keen on training. For them that's a strong snare, a thick snare, a heavy snare, an unrotting snare, and a thick yoke..."*